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Al Qaeda's Seapower Strategy

by Chris Rawley

Usama bin Laden's serendipitous demise has brought about calls for wholesale strategy reviews on issues related to the war against al Qaeda (AQ) to include debates on the US presence in Afghanistan and the efficacy of legal pursuit of terrorists. Although AQ leadership deaths are tactical victories, the network is down, but not out. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, along with heavy counter-terrorism pressure in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas, have forced the movement's brand to decentralize over a vast region spreading from West Africa to South Asia. AQ affiliates have managed to wrest minimal territory from so-called apostate governments but continue attack plotting against the West.

While our strategy has adjusted course (rightfully so) over the past decade since the September 11, 2001 attacks, the enemy's has remained fairly consistent. Simply, AQ seeks to overturn authoritarian regimes in Muslim lands – the “Near Enemy” – in an effort to regain the prestige and power of former Islamic caliphates while attacking the “Far Enemy” with terrorism and economic warfare. An overlooked component of the strategy, and one that may not have been as clearly articulated by AQ leadership and others, is the role of the oceans in spreading its virulent brand of violent Islam.

AQ has enjoyed mixed success with maritime terror plots, with a notable exception being the October 2000 attack on *USS Cole* in Aden Harbor which killed seventeen US Navy Sailors. The desire of AQ's senior leadership to disrupt global oil movement persists though, as revealed in the documents and media recovered from the assault on UBL's compound.¹ But does AQ have a more coherent maritime strategy? Some historical perspective is helpful in understanding the role of seapower in AQ's planning and operations.

Sea power and Islamic History

Following its inception in the seventh century, Islam spread across a wide span of Asia, Europe, and Africa through conquest, trade, and the travels of nomadic peoples such as the Arab Bedu. By the ninth century, a powerful Islamic civilization covered much of the Eastern Hemisphere. The Islamic empire's economic engine was enabled by caravans traveling overland trade routes which were linked together by strategic ports. At the height of Islamic civilization, lateen-rigged vessels moved vast quantities of slaves, spices, metals, money, and people through these ports, across the Indian Ocean, and into the Mediterranean.

Numerous historical examples establish Arab mastery of the naval and commercial aspects of seapower. Long before the Portuguese, Dutch, and English conquered the seas, the Arabs were navigating on the open ocean. Books such as Ahmad Bin Majid's *The Benefits and*

¹“Oil Tanker Terror Hijacks Easy, Attacks Complex.” *USA Today*, May 21, 2011. http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2011-05-21-terror-plot-oil-tankers_n.htm

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Principles of Oceanography (1489) and Suleiman al Malin's, *Fundamentals for the Mastery of Naval Science* (1511) demonstrate the Arabs' early proficiency at sea.

During Islam's rise, sailors from Egypt, North Africa, and Spain controlled the Mediterranean and ports such as Palermo, Alexandria, Tunis, Algiers, and Seville. The conquest was so complete that the period between 825 and 902 the sea is often referred to by historians as the "Saracen Mediterranean." Indeed, historian Henri Pirenne believed that Islam's dominance of the Mediterranean enabled the rise of Islamic civilization. After the Normans and their fast ships conquered Sicily prior to the Crusades, Western civilization began to regain its hegemony in the Mediterranean.

Two centuries later, the Ottomans tried, but couldn't replicate the domination of the Mediterranean to the extent of their predecessors. And another 500 years later, pirates along the Trucial Coast in the Persian Gulf and North Africa's Barbary Coast matched European and American navies gun for gun and severely disrupted western commerce.

In the Wake of the Spice Trade

A variety of factors have driven AQ to look towards the sea to spread and support their movement. The network's combat power has depended upon on the transportation of willing foreign fighters to various jihadi fronts. Foreign fighters are violent extremists who leave their home countries and travel over sea, land, and air routes to train and take up arms in conflict zones. The foreign fighter pipeline has supported numerous jihadi battlefields, including Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Chechnya, Bosnia, Kashmir, Somalia, and Yemen. Enhanced security procedures such as no-fly lists have denied these fighters the most convenient form of twenty-first century transcontinental transportation and driven many of them back to the more traditional sea routes.

For hundreds of years, Arab traders in sailing dhows followed the seasonal monsoons in the Indian Ocean to move spices and other goods from the Orient to European markets. Today, diesel powered dhows with very similar designs move cargo – both legitimate and illicit – along many of the same routes. Criminal networks, insurgent groups and transnational terrorists utilize these routes to ship fighters, weapons, and other commodities across the sea. AQ can easily outsource its facilitation to human smugglers and drug runners who own these rat lines.

AQ has also moved key leaders across these routes as the indictment unsealed in July 2011 against Ahmed Abdulkadir Warsame revealed. Warsame was an al Shabaab facilitator who had traveled to Yemen to coordinate logistics and operations with Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and was captured by U.S. forces at sea while attempting to return to Somalia.² The same route across the Gulf of Aden is utilized by human smugglers who annually transport thousands of refugees paying anywhere from \$30 to \$120 per person to make the perilous 30 hour journey from Somalia to Yemen in less-than-seaworthy vessels. Al Qaeda's affiliates, whether by conscious decision or happenstance, have secured access to a number of important ports along these shipping lanes. Some of these locations include:

- Karachi: The presence of Islamic fighters in Karachi is undeniable as they recently attacked a Pakistani Naval Base there. Although AQ does not control this port, it's a logical

²Dilanian, Ken. "Terrorism Suspect Secretly Held for Two Months." *Los Angeles Times*, July 16, 2011. <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/jul/06/nation/la-na-somali-detainee-20110706>

jumping off point for transiting AQ militants fleeing the drone strikes in the FATA and for facilitating the trafficking of narcotics from the Makran Coast to the Persian Gulf and East Africa. In 2008, international naval forces operating in the Indian Ocean seized 53 tons of drugs along the “hashish highway” and another 22 tons in 2009. These smuggling routes reflect a nexus between criminal drug trafficking and the funding of ongoing conflict and corruption in Afghanistan.

- Kismaayo: Located a few hundred miles south of Mogadishu, near the mouth of the Jubba River, Kismaayo is fully under the control of AQ affiliate Al Shabaab. Originally developed with US assistance in the 1960s the port based the then-robust Somali Navy. The port now provides what is likely al Shabaab’s primary source of revenue, via taxes on imports and exports. In addition to Kismaayo, al Shabaab probably uses any number of various small ports along Somalia’s 3,300 kilometer coastline, including those in semi-autonomous Puntland and Somaliland, to import munitions and fighters

- Zinjibar: The Arab Spring’s spread into Yemen has provided AQAP with an opportunity to expand its safe haven. Zinjibar, the capital of Yemen’s Abyan Governorate, is a small town on the Yemeni coast located on a strategic road between the larger ports of Aden and Mukalleh. The majority of Zinjibar’s population has fled the city, while heavy fighting continues between pro-Saleh government forces and AQAP militants. Zinjibar provides AQAP with a potential springboard for launching operations into the Gulf of Aden. AQAP’s advance in Yemen’s southern coast may even be part of a broader maritime strategy. Frederick Kagan notes that “it would seem that their aim is to secure major lines of communication from the Arabian Sea to southern Saudi Arabia and its traditional trade and pilgrimage routes.”³

-Port Sudan: The deep-water port with modern facilities is about 160 nautical miles away from Jeddah, Saudi Arabia and an embarkation point for many African Muslims making the Hajj to Mecca. In the 1990s, Sudan served as the home of UBL and an incubator for the nascent AQ movement. The port continues to serve as a Red Sea hub for terrorist arms smuggling. Some of these smugglers attempting to move weapons to Hamas have been the reported targets of Israeli strikes.

-Benghazi: NATO’s war against the incumbent regime has secured the eastern Libyan port of Benghazi for use by the Transitional National Council (TNC) rebels. This port is essential for exporting the TNC’s oil and supporting logistics and humanitarian operations for anti-Gadhafi forces. Unfortunately, Benghazi was also once a nexus of North African foreign fighter movement into the Iraq war during the mid-2000s. Although TNC denies AQ involvement in their cause, there have been reports of militant involvement in the city. It is reasonable to believe AQ will exploit the chaos of the Libyan conflict as a source for weapons and to move fighters to and from Benghazi. As an example, SA-7 man portable missiles have been reported missing from Libya and have moved across North Africa.⁴ Because NATO’s enforcement of the UN-sanctioned maritime arms embargo is focused on Gadhafi-held ports, it might be fairly simple for extremists to smuggle out these missiles and other weapons from Benghazi or other rebel-held harbors.

³Kagan, Frederick. “Al Qaeda’s Yemen Strategy.”

<http://www.criticalthreats.org/yemen/frederick-kagan-qaeda-yemen-strategy-june-21-2011>

⁴ Chivers, C. J. “Anti-aircraft Missiles on the Loose in Libya.” *New York Times*, July 14, 2011.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/15/world/africa/15libya.html?pagewanted=all>

Additionally, AQ has readily demonstrated the ability to utilize many smaller ports or anchorages throughout their operating area which are suitable for the dhows and smaller coastal trading craft common to this part of the world.

Channeling Mahan

In the tradition of earlier Islamic civilizations, AQ's plan to recreate a caliphate naturally requires a sea-based strategy. AQ uses the sea primarily to support and link its land-based operations, but attacks on the ocean also buttress its offensive strategy.

Globalization, partly enabled by an efficient maritime transportation system, has led to unprecedented productivity and connectivity in the world's economy. But the scale and efficiency of that system has also brought fragility, which Alfred Mahan recognized in his seminal work on sea power over a century ago. As more recently noted by Geoffrey Till, "The marine transportation system's tendency to produce fewer but much larger tankers and container ships and to concentrate on nodal hub-ports intended to supply the needs of regions may also provide the malign with particularly fruitful targets."⁵ Very large crude carriers are vital to the world's economy and the majority of them initiate their journeys in the Persian Gulf. To AQ, these economic leviathans represent not only tempting targets, but the despised apostate regimes they seek to overthrow and the wealthy Western states that fund the Gulf kingdoms. The 2002 attack on the *MV Limberg* off Yemen, the 2010 attack in the Strait of Hormuz by AQ's sister group, the Abdullah Azzam Brigades on the tanker *M. Star*, and the recent UBL threat stream illustrate that disrupting the movement of petroleum is a critical part of an offensive maritime strategy.

Despite rumors of a rogue AQ merchant fleet in the early 2000s, the network probably has not acquired any vessels of its own other than small craft for attacks. AQ doesn't require a naval force when they can hire or steal other vessels for their facilitation and attacks, much as Lashkar-e-Taiba did when they infiltrated fighters in a hijacked fishing trawler to strike Mumbai in 2008. Planning, resourcing, and executing a successful maritime attack is not a trivial endeavor, but AQ is not lacking in experience or motivation to repeat successes again as they have continued to do in the aviation sector. Moreover, although the links between pirates and terrorism are sketchy, the tactics of hijacking a modern ship have been well established. AQ doesn't even have to be moderately successful in these attacks for them to have a major negative impact. Similar to their persistent focus on commercial airliners, their goal is to incite fear and over-reaction, while increasing the cost of business for Western governments.

⁵ Till, Geoffrey. *Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century, Second Edition* (pp. 3-4). T & F Books UK. Kindle Edition. 2009.



It remains to be seen if bin Laden's successor, Ayman al-Zawahiri, will continue al Qaeda's maritime strategy. However, he has echoed his predecessor's desire that the "greater state of Islam will be established from the ocean to the ocean."⁶ Regardless, given the innovation and independence demonstrated by AQ's "franchises" in Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, it stands to reason that their utilization of sea lanes and maritime attack plots will continue, either independently, or with guidance from above.

Denying AQ the Sea

The US Navy has contributed greatly to countering AQ on land and at sea the past decade during many overt and some not-so-visible operations. However, an intentional and coordinated naval campaign designed to counter AQ's maritime strategy has been lacking. The June 2011 "National Strategy for Counterterrorism" lists degrading links between AQ and its affiliates as an overarching goal. A coherent maritime CT campaign would facilitate this goal along with others related to eliminating safe havens and denying terrorist enablers. Needless to say, this campaign should stretch across the US military's Geographic Combatant Commanders; involve other relevant government agencies, and cooperation with international partners and commercial maritime interests. The following lines of effort might be included:

- Continued vigilance against attacks on military and commercial targets: Since the *Cole*'s bombing the US Navy has greatly enhanced force protection measures. Disrupting

⁶ IntelCenter "Words of Ayman Al-Zawahiri, Volume 1," Tempest Publishing, 2008

commercial oil production and distribution infrastructure at sea and along coastlines is an important objective for AQ. Because there are not enough naval vessels in the world to protect every offshore oil platform or tanker, oil and shipping companies should take a more proactive role in defending their assets with private armed guards as they have recently done to prevent pirate attacks. Even as piracy in the Indian Ocean is defeated, embarked security detachments along AQ's thoroughfares should remain a part of the oil industry's security plans.

- Actively counter AQ smuggling and facilitation at sea: Additional intelligence collection and maritime counter-smuggling operations along known AQ routes should be undertaken to stop the movement of leadership, fighters, and materials. When appropriate, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets should be shifted away from hunting terror leaders on land and towards countering their facilitators at sea. Because all nearly all the world's countries benefit from these sea lanes, international naval cooperation is a must in this effort. A supporting objective would develop *local* maritime security partners near key AQ coastal hubs to sustain counter-facilitation efforts for the long term.

- Recapture strategic ports: This whole of government effort would enable partner nations with training, intelligence sharing, and when necessary, fire power and direct combat support – to take back this key terrain from al Qaeda.

Properly resourced and executed, this sort of strategy would strangle AQ's supply chains, deny fighters freedom of movement to safe havens to train and plan, and assist in preventing AQ's affiliates from sharing resources. Furthermore, a precision sea denial campaign against al Qaeda would be a bargain compared to protracted and costly land wars. Only until the network is completely defeated – and this goal is completely achievable in the next few years – should efforts to deny the enemy the sea be ceased.

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